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ABSTRACT

Students with special needs living in rural areas face a difficult challenge as they prepare for employment and adult life. Access to vocational education in rural areas may be limited by isolation, problems in teacher recruitment and retention, curriculum and instructional deficiencies, and weak financial support. In addition, program relevance and student outcomes are negatively influenced by outdated program offerings, lack of quality, limited relevance to the local job market and industry needs, lack of local job experience opportunities, and lack of recognition by rural educators of vocational education's role in decreasing both the likelihood and impact of worker layoffs or job displacements. Vocational education can play a key role in the economic growth of rural areas. The school can act as an agency of rural economic development; skill-specific vocational education can prepare students with special needs for the job market. If skill-specific vocational education is reduced, vocational educators must encourage special-needs rural students to pursue further education. Vocational education in rural areas can be improved by strategies placing an emphasis on support services personnel, guidance and counseling, involvement of a variety of public and private service providers, more effective use of existing community resources, and modification of existing employment opportunities to address rural conditions. Improvements can also be made by forming cooperative programs, taking administrative action, using mobile facilities, using electronic technology, forming school-business partnerships, and training for entrepreneurship. (28 references) (KC)

TASPP BRIEF

Technical Assistance for Special Populations Program

Volume 2 Number 2

ISSUES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN RURAL AREAS

by Jay W. Rojewski, Ph.D.

Approximately one-quarter of this country's citizens (over 56 million) live in non-metropolitan (rural) areas (Brown, 1989; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). As such, small rural districts continue to be an important component of public school enterprise.

- Small rural districts represent roughly two-thirds of all public school systems in the country and are responsible for educating between one-fourth and one-third of all public elementary and secondary age students, roughly 10 million students annually (Stephens, 1988; Veir, 1990).

Vocational educators in rural America face many unique problems and must often devise equally unique solutions in order to meet the needs of students with special needs. The degree of success which rural vocational educators experience in responding to the challenges and opportunities presented will determine the ability of their students to gain competitive employment and maintain an acceptable quality of life. This *BRIEF* identifies some of the problems practitioners face when serving students with special needs in rural vocational education programs and also examines solutions which have been proposed to eliminate these identified barriers.

Limited Access to Vocational Education in Rural Areas

Changes in the composition of the student population require that rural vocational education examines its role in the general high school curriculum and with students from special populations. Rural schools report serving increased numbers and percentages of students who are either disabled, disadvantaged, considered at-risk, and/or represent cultural minorities. Current projections indicate that these trends will continue to increase in the near future (Helge, 1984, 1987; Parrish & Lynch, 1990; Posey & Hollenback, 1990).

A number of factors impact on the delivery of vocational education to students with special needs in rural areas. First, access to vocational education in rural areas may be limited. Service delivery may be restricted by the following:

- **Isolation:** Increased transportation costs claim a high percentage of rural school resources and limit student access to quality vocational programs (Cole & Ranken, 1981; Helge, 1984; Jansen, 1988; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988).
- **Teacher Recruitment and Retention:** Difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers and support personnel coupled with inadequate staff development activities limit the quality of staff in rural school districts (Cole & Ranken, 1981; Conklin & Olson, 1988; Helge, 1984; Jansen, 1988; Kirmer, Lockwood, Mickler, & Sweeney, 1984; Veir, 1990; Will, 1985).
- **Curriculum and Instruction:** Critics charging rural vocational education programs with providing substandard services have pointed to the following problems (Cole & Ranken, 1981; Elliott, 1988; Emerson & De Young, 1982; Jess, 1989; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988; Jansen, 1988; Parrish & Lynch, 1990; Schwartz, 1987; Stephens, 1988; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988; Veir, 1989, 1990):

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Factors Limiting Access to Vocational Services

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lack of program depth, breadth, and diversity

lack of appropriate vocational-related services including vocational assessment

limited opportunities for students to receive quality guidance and counseling assistance

- **Financial Support:** Weak tax bases and the high cost of rural education programs and services limit the ability of rural schools to adequately sustain vocational programs. Lack of financial support results in an inability to finance extensive support systems or purchase quality equipment such as shops, labs, libraries, and special equipment.

The Changing Context of Vocational Education in Rural Areas

Recent changes in rural America have resulted in the need to update rural vocational programs. High unemployment patterns, changing demographics and persistent underdevelopment of human resources characterize many rural areas. In addition, the shift away from manufacturing and agriculture toward service and information-based industry and business have dramatically changed the context of vocational education in rural America (Stephens, 1988). Problems with program relevancy and the quality of student outcomes in rural areas have been apparent. Vocational education is beset by the following difficulties in trying to provide relevant and quality programs (Elliott, 1988; Emerson & De Young, 1982; Jansen, 1988; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988; Schwartz, 1987):

Factors Limiting Program Relevancy and Student Outcomes

- outdated program offerings lacking in quality
- limited relevancy to the local job market and industry needs
- lack of local job experience opportunities
- lack of recognition by rural educators of vocational education's role in decreasing both the likelihood and impact of worker lay-offs or job displacements

The Role of Vocational Education in the Economic Growth of Rural Areas

Even if viable and relevant vocational programs exist, successful outcomes for students with special needs require the existence of a variety of post-graduation employment opportunities. Unfortunately, rural communities have experienced very low rates of growth in employment opportunities over the past decade. In fact, since 1979 rural employment has grown by only 4 percent compared to 13 percent for urban areas (Schwartz, 1987; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). *"High unemployment rates, pervasive poverty, and an exodus of jobs and youth in many ways define rural communities in the late 1980's"* (White, 1990, p. 32). Because of this, questions have been raised as to the role which vocational education should have in the economic growth of rural areas.

The School as an Agency of Rural Economic Development

Some advocate that one key to success in rural communities is to view the school as an agency of rural economic development. Vocational education should in essence, "help rural educational institutions become job incubators and to help students become job creators, rather than simply job applicants" (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988, p.116). Vocational education has been shown to play a pivotal role in arresting economic decline in some rural areas. White (1990) asserts that "if Vocational Special Needs Education is to be effective in rural areas, schools will need to become 'entrepreneurial incubators,' and the responsibility for leadership will fall to those persons interested in connecting students to jobs and careers" (p. 32). Jansen (1988) cautions, however, that rural development can be inhibited by limited support services, limited levels of professional expertise, and limited role models.

There is a growing belief that the role of providing job-specific vocational training belongs at the postsecondary level rather than at the high school. This philosophy dictates that vocational education play a different role in the rural high school curriculum—not as a specific job skill provider but as a provider of opportunities for

students to acquire an understanding of various occupational choices and help them master basic skills that will put them in a position to seek more specific occupational training (Field, 1984).

The necessity of continuing one's education at the postsecondary level in order to acquire specific vocational skills holds significant implications for special populations in rural America. Reports have shown that rural students typically remain in their local communities after graduation. Many students with special needs either won't or can't continue vocational training beyond high school often because of a fear of the unknown and reluctance to venture outside the safety of the community resulting in limited educational aspirations and decisions. Studies have also shown that fewer rural students either attend or graduate from college because their desire for better education and employment is perceived as impossible to achieve (Elliott, 1988; Parrish & Lynch, 1990; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Sharratt (1988) noted that an urgent need exists for vocational education programs to prepare rural high school youth for the inevitable job market. He believed that the majority of students in rural communities face only one prospect—they must go to work. *If specific job skill training is eliminated from the rural high school curriculum, many students with special needs may face the prospect of obtaining entry-level jobs which offer little opportunity for career development or growth.* As the trend toward reduction of job-specific training in high schools continues, support systems must be developed which will encourage these students to attend postsecondary institutions with the aid of an unfragmented and coordinated transition effort.

Improving Vocational Education in Rural Areas

There is little doubt that rural vocational education programs face difficult challenges in serving students with special needs. However, rural communities possess many inherent strengths from which vocational educators may draw as they seek alternative models of instructional delivery. These strengths may include a strong work ethic, mutual support, early exposure to work, capability of rapid and innovative change, and family involvement in community activities.

Moreover, rural settings may possess distinct advantages over urban settings for vocational educators working with students with special needs. Smaller bureaucracies, reduced waiting periods, a willingness of rural educators to examine alternative delivery systems, greater familiarity with students, and immediate delivery of special support services upon identification of student needs may facilitate service delivery in rural schools (Sarkees & West, 1990).

Currently, a number of strategies enhance the provision of vocational services to students with special needs in rural areas. In general, alternatives place an emphasis on support services personnel, guidance and counseling, involvement of a variety of public and private service providers, more effective use of existing community resources, and modification of existing employment opportunities to address rural conditions (Veir, 1990). While some of these methods are unique to rural communities, others have been adapted from urban areas to fit the rural environment.

Educational Cooperatives

A popular and difficult alternative used to address rural problems in vocational program delivery involves the formation of educational cooperatives. Cooperatives join schools together for the purposes of sharing such resources as programs, staff, and technology (Cole, Smith, & Ranken, 1981; Long, 1982; McIntosh, 1986; Parrish & Lynch, 1990; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Either centralized or decentralized facilities provide vocational programming for the schools. School collaboration holds many potential benefits for those involved including (Helge, 1984; Jansen, 1988; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988; Kirmer et al., 1984; Parrish & Lynch, 1990):

- access to a greater variety of programs (vocational assessment, inservice training and staff development, and guidance and counseling by qualified personnel)
- greater economic efficiency and cost savings via shared staff and programs and the elimination of unnecessary duplication of effort

- advantage of joining together for services while maintaining the benefits of a small school
- reduction of resistance to change in rural districts

A cooperative strategy used with increasing frequency involves the consolidation or restructuring of school districts. Some professionals see school consolidation as inevitable (Stephens, 1988), while others are diametrically opposed to any movement toward eliminating rural schools. However, the effects of declining enrollments and resources are having a significant impact on individual school districts' ability to finance vocational education programs (Kennedy, 1989).

Actions which rural school administrators could take to assist vocational educators and students with special needs enrolled in vocational programs include the following (Forbes, 1989, p. 40):

Administrative Action

- schedule school day, week and/or semester flexibility
- share staff with other schools and districts
- share instructional resources with schools and districts
- use volunteers to instruct and provide other services
- integrate an outcome-based curriculum
- match class size with instructional mode
- employ part-time instructional staff
- differentiate staff roles
- coordinate social services and encourage involvement with students during high school

Mobile Facilities Units

Use of mobile classrooms to travel the long distances often found in rural areas has long been advocated (Jansen, 1988; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988). In rural, remote and sparsely populated areas, it may be more convenient to travel to students, rather than have students go to the program. Vocational mobile units include vans which drive from site to site, serving as mobile classrooms equipped with work space, assessment tools and training activities. Local business persons may participate by volunteering to talk to students about various occupations (Schwartz, 1987).

Use of Available Technology

Emerging technologies are seen as a means of providing easy access to educational programs traditionally not offered in rural areas. Proponents have argued that it is easier and cheaper to transport information than people, however, opponents cite the potential for competition, high costs of course development, effects of technology on students, teacher preparation, and a tendency to permit technology to dominate class activity as reasons to restrict use of technology. Regardless of the debate, it appears that the use of technology is on the increase. Commonly cited types of technology include the following (Forbes, 1989; Kerwood & Starsen, 1988):

- interactive video
- audio teleconferencing
- videotaped lessons
- one-way television
- personal computers networked to mainframe computers
- satellites.
- two-way television (low power TV, cable, microwave, interactive TV, fixed service, and fiber optics)

School/Business Partnerships

The importance of developing effective partnerships between schools and business can apply equally to both urban and rural areas, however, the success of vocational programs for students with special needs in rural areas may be more dependent on these partnerships. It is impossible for rural vocational programs to employ the number of staff necessary to train students for all potential jobs in the community.

Entrepreneurship

Vocational programs in North Carolina and Georgia have assisted communities in creating a wide variety of enterprises. These programs focus on the following activities (White, 1990):

- developing viable productive enterprises in the local community, primarily using students with special needs supervised by high school faculty
- generating or attracting income-producing opportunities to the community
- coordinating local economic development efforts through the local high school
- training students with special needs in entrepreneurial skills
- stimulating ties between human and social service agencies which respond to local needs, interests, and circumstances

Conclusion

Students with special needs living in rural America face a difficult challenge as they prepare for employment and adult life. Vocational education programs can provide the assistance they require to be successful in this endeavor. This *TASPP BRIEF* has explored some of the issues surrounding the delivery of vocational education in rural areas. Solutions were discussed, however, there appears to be no one best method. Instead, vocational educators are urged to examine the needs of their local community and develop programs according to those identified needs (Kerwood & Starnsen, 1988). By doing so collectively, the future for rural youth with special needs will be considerably brighter.

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